DOCUMENT RESUME

FL 000 997

ED 025 175

The Nature of Language Learning.
Wisconsin Univ., Milwaukee.
Pub Date Apr 68
Note- 6p.
Journal Cit- UWM Magazine; v2 n2 p25-9 Apr 1968.
EDRS Price MF- $0.25 HC- $0.40
Descriptors- Behavioral Science Research, *Behavioral Sciences, Behavior Patterns, *Cultural Context, Discriminatory Attitudes (Social), Educational Interest, Idioms, Language Ability, Language Instruction, Language Patterns, *Middle Schools, *Modern Languages, Motivation, Phonemics, *Second Language Learning, Sociolinguistics

Four behavioral scientists in a colloquium at the University of Wisconsin discussed various aspects of language learning. Concerned primarily with pre-high-school pupils and addressing their remarks to language teachers, the scientists offered these proposals: (1) language teaching is more effective if taught in a natural setting, (2) environmental conditions affect language learning, (3) children learn their own language through idiomatic expressions, (4) the ability to learn a second language is innate, and (5) various factors such as attitude, prestige of language and culture, motivation, and psychological barriers can hinder or aid language learning. Participants included John Gumperz, Courtney Cazden, Wick Miller, and Wallace E. Lambert. (DS)

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Spring 1968
The UWM MAGAZINE is published four times annually, in January, April, July, and October. Vol. II, Serial No. 2.
Second class postage is paid at Milwaukee, Wisconsin
© 1968 by the Regents of The University of Wisconsin.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN—MILWAUKEE
BUREAU OF PUBLICATIONS MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN 53201

FL 000 997

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# The Nature of Language Learning

## A Behavioral Science Viewpoint

THE NATURE OF language learning with special attention to pre-high-school children was discussed by four behavioral scientists in a colloquium sponsored by The University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Department of Language Laboratories. After more than two days of intensive exploration of this general subject by the four panelists and Professor Robert F. Roeming, the host professor, the four distinguished visitors summarized their individual positions and answered questions at a public meeting attended by language teachers. The following statements are concise distillations of the two-hour concluding public session.

These statements address themselves to the following hypothesis which resulted by mutual agreement of the participants from the total discussions of the colloquium: "Language learning and language teaching must be directed toward gaining insights into aspects of human relations. These insights should facilitate entry both into the language and into the society of that language, to the degree that any foreigner is capable of entering. Since language is a unique characteristic of being human, it would appear that such development in itself is humanizing. This point of view and goal has relevance for all who study languages."

JOHN GUMPERZ, professor of anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, has done extensive research in sociolinguistics and multilingualism and is an American authority on the teaching of Hindi.

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The basis of most spoken language courses and one of the strongest influences in the development of foreign language study was linguist Leonard Bloomfield's statement that a foreign language is best learned by direct contact with the natural speech of native speakers. Although this statement is still generally accepted, our ideas of what natural speech is and how to teach it have been refined considerably in recent years. When Bloomfield wrote, linguistics was in its infancy and linguists were particularly excited about the discovery of the phonemic principle. The fact that each language has its own structure was a discovery that needed to be explored and worked into modern language courses. One of the first course programs to incorporate these principles was the famous Army Spoken Language Series, developed during World War II to train Americans to speak a variety of European, Asian, and African languages, many of which had never been taught before in the U. S. In the Series much attention was devoted to the problem of teaching native-like pronunciation and grammar through memorization of natural conversations. For this purpose each language was analyzed separately. The cultural content of the conversations, however, was the same for the whole series. Thus each course began with such topics — familiar from tourist guides — such as introducing oneself to strangers, asking for directions, ordering food and so forth. Linguists did not realize how closely the ability to communicate effectively in a language depends on one's knowledge of the culture and behavioral etiquette of its speakers.

Recent work in language, culture, and sociolinguistics has clarified the relationship between linguistic and social patterns. It has been shown that a speaker's selection among grammatically possible alternates — what forms he uses, how he pronounces them, or when and to whom he speaks — is not entirely a matter of personal choice, but is governed by social rules. I became aware of the cultural deficiencies of spoken language training programs when as director of an NDEA center for South Asian lan-

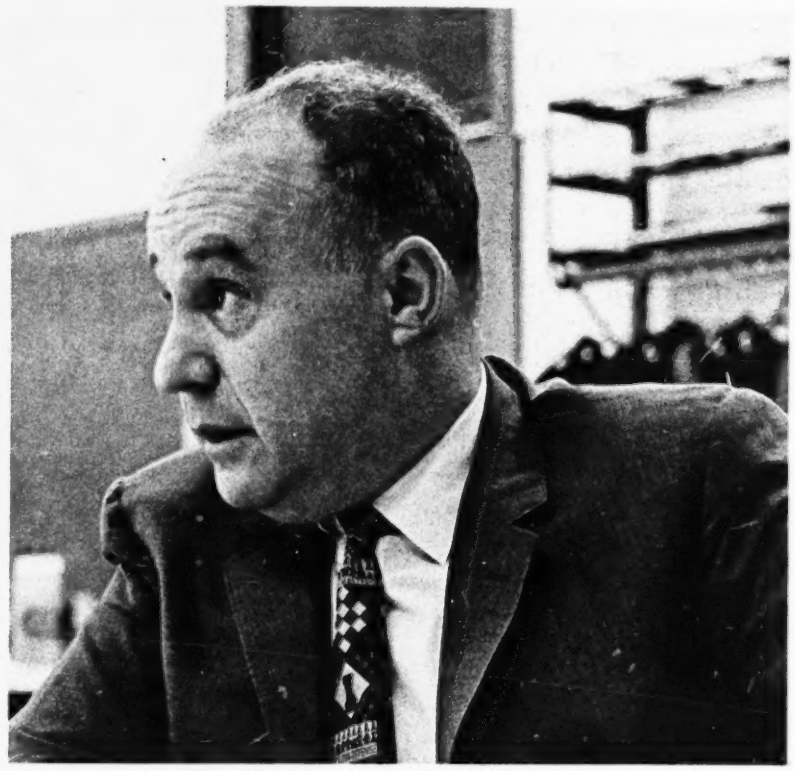
guages. I visited some students in the field. There I was flooded with complaints like: "Nobody in India speaks Hindi to me," "The language is not really useful; everybody speaks English," "The style of Hindi I was taught is not right," "The textbook is grammatically incorrect," or "I talked to that man in Hindi and he seemed offended." It seems that Americans in India had almost as much difficulty in learning to use Hindi as they had in gaining an elementary knowledge of grammar in the first place. More often than not they found themselves saying the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time. In order to avoid embarrassment, Indians preferred to talk to them in English.

We set out to construct a socially realistic language course, first by establishing what are the situations in India in which a foreigner would be expected to speak Hindi; how do natives perceive these situations and how do they distinguish between them. We found that for the purpose of language usage, it was sufficient to specify the nature of an act, the locale, and the kind of social relationship involved.

Once this was done it became possible to grade situations in approximate order of complexity. Interaction in a native bazaar, for example, was found to be socially quite simple. One goes there for a specific purpose: to buy food, clothing and so forth. No special politeness terms or personal introductions are required. The foreigner's interaction with natives of equal status, on the other hand, are socially very complex. Appropriate speech here requires detailed knowledge of Indian social structure and behaviorial etiquette. Even such seemingly straightforward situations as dealing with desk clerks in hotels are not as simple as they may seem. In India such individuals are proud of their English and deal in English even with Hindi-speaking Indians. To address them in Hindi may be misinterpreted as saying in effect, "I am thinking of you as an uneducated native."

Based on our analysis of language usage rules, we photographed sequences of pictures depicting situations of various types. We wrote dialogue to accompany the picture sequences and found that our grading of situations also made it easy to grade our materials grammatically. In bazaar situations, grammar is simple; in the more complex social situations, grammar also becomes more complex.

We remained faithful to Bloomfield's principle of teaching language in a natural setting, but we expanded the notion of rule to cover both grammar and language usage. While our method does not necessarily improve on modern techniques for teaching grammar, it does create conditions favorable for further practice in the foreign society.



## John Gumperz

COURTNEY CAZDEN, assistant professor of education and research associate in social relations at Harvard University, has been studying the factors affecting the development of verbal abilities in and out of school.

My research in first language learning has focused on two questions. First, how do children learn their native language? Second, what are the important characteristics of the environment in which this process takes place?

Let us assume for the sake of discussion that when we say a person knows a language, what he knows is not some specific way of behaving verbally, but rather what he knows is a body of knowledge which is best represented by a set of rules. On the basis of these rules a person can produce and understand an infinite number of sentences. Actually, there are two kinds of rules as John Gumperz suggested: first, the rules for grammatical sentences, and second, the rules for appropriate sentences.

Most research has been done on the acquisition of the first set of rules, which we call a grammar. The grammar of English is simply the most economical way of describing the knowledge that underlies what people do when they speak English. I am not suggesting that it is conscious knowledge. In fact, quite the contrary. Very few people would be able to state the rules for adding the "s," "z," and "iz" endings for plurals or possessives. Yet give a test to an English speaking adult that requires him to provide such endings to nonsense syllables and he can easily do it.

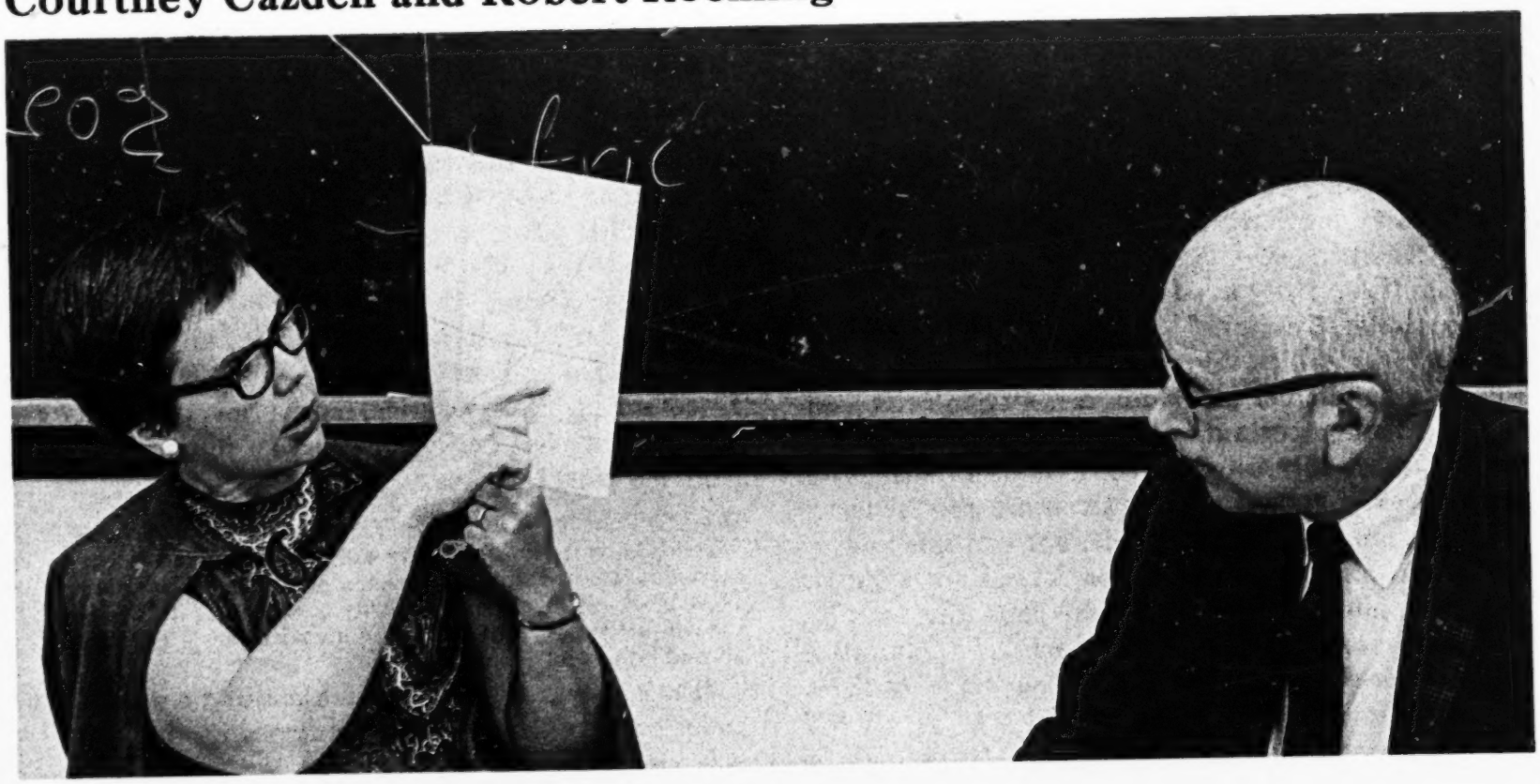
People know the rules and act on them, whether they can formulate the rules themselves or not.

When we say that children learn rules, we mean they gradually come to act on the basis of them. During this learning process, the stages they pass through are not just an idiosyncratic assortment of bits and pieces which eventually add up to the whole. One of the most important findings of a set of studies of first language learning is that children go through a series of childish rule systems or grammars which show striking similarity among children in what they say and don't say and in the errors they make.

For instance, consider the stages that children go through in learning the noun and verb inflections in English. They begin without inflections; nouns are not pluralized and verbs have no endings. They then go through a stage when they use inflections sometimes and always correctly. This is followed by a stage in which they make errors, and then finally they attain the mature pattern. Most interesting is the fact that quite early children learn to use some of the irregular verb past tenses. They say *I came* and *I went*, and yet after using these forms correctly, they begin to over-generalize and start saying *I comed* and *I goed*. This is striking evidence that whereas earlier they simply learned an idiom, they are now acting on the basis of a rule of their own. They have not heard *comed* and *goed*. These are not pieces of adult grammar acquired by imitation; they are original constructions and an important characteristic of children's learning of their native language. These errors on the way to the desired goal may look like regression or be too easily dismissed. Actually they are very significant examples of progress.

Children learn most of the basic structures of their speech by the time they enter first grade, at a time when they have obvious intellectual limitations. So naturally one wonders what aspects of the child's environment help this strikingly successful process. Many people have thought for a long time that what happens is something like this: children imitate adults, adults correct their imitations, and by a series of approximations, you get the end result. But on the basis of very careful analysis of the parent-child communication in three families that we have been studying for several years, we can say definitely that this kind of correction by the parent of the child's immature speech does not take place. Parents and children talk about the things that are important to them and grammatical immaturities are virtually ignored. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence of clear limitations on the role that imitation could play in children's learning of their native language because children tend to filter what they hear through their own rule system. As far as we know now, what seems to be important is exposure to lots of well-formed sentences in the context of conversation that is meaningful and important to the child.

**Courtney Cazden and Robert Roeming**



WICK MILLER, chairman of the Department of Anthropology and associate professor at the University of Utah, is presently studying the anthropological correlations between language study and culture patterns, with research on American Indian languages.

The nativistic hypothesis states simply that each child has the ability to learn a language. Because of certain universal features found in the grammar and phonology of all languages, it would appear that general aspects of universal grammar and phonology are, in a certain sense, wired into people. There are difficulties in explaining the psychological processes by which a person learns a language. For instance, if one utilizes the psychological models for learning that are now present, it is very difficult to explain how a child can abstract a grammar from the babble, sometimes grammatical, sometimes ungrammatical, of sentence fragments or statements that are never finished. And yet they do, as Mrs. Cazden said.

I would like to expand this hypothesis in connection with second language learning and suggest that everyone has the ability to learn a second language. This may seem like an extreme view since there is presently no evidence. I would like to present, as a hypothesis, that this ability to learn a second language is an innate ability with a biological basis. There are observed differences in the ability to learn a second language as the result of differences in cultural values, in attitudes about language and language learning, and in motivation, but, if this hypothesis is true, there is little innate individual difference in the ability to learn a second language. Because of the secondary factors, however, the effects of the biological basis do not stand out in bold relief, as they do for first language learning.

I also believe that there is no perfect bilingual. No person can completely control two languages with equal facility, with no interaction or interference between the two. One will often find that a person will speak two languages quite well, but there will be either semantic or grammatical fusing or confusion between the two, or in some cases, imperfect learning influenced by the first language. Though there is no perfect bilingual, certainly there are fluent bilinguals who can handle certain kinds of communicative settings that are important to that individual.

I am most interested in the informal settings for learning. We know something about informal learning and would like to incorporate some of this information into formal settings. In a formal situation we have a limited amount of time; thus the learning situation cannot help but be artificial. The question then is how to maximize the formal settings by distilling those aspects which are successful in informal settings and condensing them in time. In an informal situation, the individual is exposed to the second language, thirty to fifty hours a week. You simply cannot do this in the high school French course, because you do not have the time.

Let us try to isolate some of the informal factors involved in language learning by using an example from Navaho. In the heart of the reservation, we frequently find that the Navaho child's primary contact with English is through a single teacher in school. The children hear a little English on the radio. In such cases, little competence in English develops.

This lack of language development has nothing to do with the exposure to a single person. In some California Indian groups, one finds a relative, aunt or grandmother, in the household who speaks a different tribal language. The children exposed to this person are successful in learning a second language. Thus one can conclude that in the classroom setting the communicative settings are narrow, while in the home with a relative, the communicative settings are broad.

A second important aspect in the learning of the new language is the prestige of the two languages and the two cultures. While many Navahos learn to speak English, very few English speakers learn Navaho. A parallel situation exists in Texas and New Mexico where many more Spanish speakers learn English, but only a few Anglos learn the local dialect of Spanish. This particular dialect of Southwestern Spanish has low prestige.

Cultural and linguistic similarities or differences will affect the learning of the new language. If the two languages are related and quite obviously similar, learning is easier. If the communicative settings are similar, language learning is easier. For instance, French is simpler for us to learn than Hindi, not because of any inherent difference in the languages, but because we share a common Western European cultural background.

Attitude also affects language learning. Americans consider it difficult to learn a second language; West Africans consider it easy, almost a game, to learn a second, third or fourth language. All of these factors, therefore, attitude, prestige, motivation, can either aid or hinder what I believe may be an innate ability to learn a second language.

WALLACE E. LAMBERT, professor of psychology at McGill University in Montreal, has conducted a study of attitudes toward language learning among Canadians and New Englanders. He is primarily concerned with the psychological attitudes that affect motivation and learning of a second language.

If one looks at the process of learning a second language from a socio-psychological perspective, the importance of the student's orientation toward the whole

**Wallace Lambert and Wick Miller**

chore of learning a language and his views and attitudes toward the other group whose language he is about to study seem to be two important factors that determine how well he will learn the new language. This does not ignore the fact that aptitudes for language also play a role. However, in a series of investigations with high school students in Canada and in the United States, we were able to predict fairly accurately how well an individual would learn a foreign language if we knew enough about his attitudes toward the other group and his orientation to the process of language learning. For example, his motivation might be affected if he wanted to learn the language for a utilitarian reason. An individual who thought he could sell more insurance to French-Canadians if he knew French better, might have a strong motivation for learning the language, but he still might not learn as well as another who had a sympathetic and personal (rather than a utilitarian) attitude toward the other group.

As we looked deeper into the role of attitude, we found it was related to general ethnocentrism: those who are less prejudiced toward a particular foreign group are generally less ethnocentric. Thus the questions that we used in our study had little to do with the technical domain of language skills, from the point of view of the teacher — such as the learning of grammar. We found that a child's learning ability could also be predicted to a certain degree by understanding the attitude of his parents. We approached the parents through telephone interviews in which we asked simple questions like, "Does the child like French," and "How is she studying it at home." Then we turned to a crucial but seemingly innocuous question. "Are there any French-Canadians in the area with whom your son or daughter has contacts?" One mother answered, "No, there are no French-Canadians in the area, and if there were, they would never enter our house." With that, we had all the information we wanted on the attitude in that home. Another mother said, "Yes, the French-Canadians who live across the street come in regularly, particularly the children, and I encourage them to speak French so our children can pick up the language." From these interviews we saw the relation between the adolescent's views and those of the family; it was clear that the whole attitudinal complex built up in the socialization process has important repercussions for language learning.

In Canada, we have the opportunity to watch children become skilled in a second language, since we have all the cultural props for learning two languages, such as television which can be watched in either French or English. Because of the opportunities for second language learning, we have been able to observe a phenomena that occurs when a student approaches the point of *anomie*, a sociological concept referring to a lack of belonging in society. We found that advanced students of French from the United States, who took an intensive summer course in Montreal, often encountered a feeling of *anomie* as they progressed to the point of being fluent in French. Our interviews show that these people often encounter an uncomfortable state of not belonging fully to either culture, the French one they are becoming skilled in, or the American one they are using as a home base. It is as though they had moved psychologically to becoming competent in the second language and culture, but then look back with chagrin on the possibility of losing ties with their English-American background. This is one of the psychological barriers to the learning of a second language that must be adjusted to or circumvented.